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# Insight 16

## Minority Ethnic Pupils' Experiences of School in Scotland (MEPESS)

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## MINORITY ETHNIC PUPILS' EXPERIENCES OF SCHOOL IN SCOTLAND (MEPESS)

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### Introduction

The Race Equality Advisory Forum (REAF), established by the Scottish Executive, prepared a race equality strategy following the release of the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry to address institutional racism, with a specific section on education. One of REAF's recommendations was to commission research on the experience of minority ethnic pupils within schools. The research presented in this *Insight* grew out of these developments.

### The Study's Aims

The central aim of the study was to identify and document the experiences of minority ethnic pupils in a range of school settings in different parts of Scotland. The specific objectives were:

- to identify key factors relating to ethnic diversity which promote or restrict inclusion;
- to establish teachers', parents' and pupils' perceptions of minority ethnic pupils' educational achievements, experiences and expectations;
- to establish the factors which affect minority ethnic pupils' achievement and attainment;
- to examine the experiences of minority ethnic pupils in terms of educational attainment, participation in school activities, and personal and social skills; and
- to determine the impact on minority ethnic pupils of different teaching and learning styles, curriculum provision and assessment systems.

The information generated enabled the first two aims to be covered more comprehensively than the others. Quantitative data was particularly difficult to access.

### Methods

The main methods of data collection were semi-structured interviews and focus groups with pupils, parents and teachers, postal questionnaires, documentary evidence and analysis of quantitative data. Four Scottish, urban-based local authorities participated in the study. A final sample of 24 schools (3 primary; 2 secondary; 1 special in each of the 4 education authorities) was selected, based on medium-to-high numbers of minority ethnic pupils<sup>1</sup>; the school's record of good practice in terms of inclusiveness; and their catchment area including pupils from different socio-economic groups.

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<sup>1</sup> A medium/large ethnic minority population was considered important to provide a large enough sample for quantitative analysis and to protect the identity of individual pupils.

This Insight will concentrate on findings gained from the qualitative data, which was collected in 2002 from 94 pupils, 82 teachers and 38 parents. Eleven focus groups were held for pupils, but pupils with additional support needs were interviewed individually and face-to-face. Semi-structured interviews with key staff, such as Senior Management Teams, Year Heads, Guidance Staff and Support Teachers took place in their respective schools. Parents of pupils of different minority ethnic backgrounds, including pupils with additional support needs, attended focus groups or were interviewed by telephone.

This report focuses on understanding these pupils' experiences of schools in relation to inclusion. It is divided into three sections; the first addresses perceptions of, and attitudes to, inclusion; the second considers indicators of, and barriers to, inclusion; and the final section highlights areas where change is recommended. Throughout the report the views of pupils, parents and teachers are compared.

## Perceptions of and Attitudes to Inclusion

### Inclusion and race equality

All respondents recognise that school ethos makes a positive contribution to a sense of inclusion, particularly because it socializes the entire school community. Pupils who considered their school inclusive gave examples of teachers valuing the different community languages and understanding the faiths and traditions of their minority ethnic pupils. However, some young contributors were conscious of being perceived as 'outsiders' even though many were born in Scotland and felt that colour, country of origin, language and religious background were factors determining whether they were accepted as belonging.

Where their school had made explicit efforts to recognise diversity, pupils were generous with their praise.

*They have Chinese names on the wall, like teachers' names. But they didn't know it was upside down, they stuck the name upside down. Then they put it the right way round. It's nice to know they want to get involved with us and put labels for new people coming to the school, who don't even know where to find the principal's office.*

Pupil

**How can schools avoid constructing notions of race equality as only being of relevance to minority ethnic pupils?**

Most teachers related the promotion of race equality to working with minority ethnic pupils. Race equality was often spoken of in terms of how well the school was supporting bilingual pupils through its interaction with the English as an Additional Language (EAL) service, or as having a strong stance on racist incidents and the promotion of multiculturalism through faiths and festivals. Few teachers focussed on how they used the curriculum to take forward anti-racist issues or what the benefits of race equality work would be for majority ethnic pupils or for themselves as teachers.

Unlike many of the teachers interviewed, parents did not equate race equality with bilingualism or tackling racist incidents. Race equality was perceived in broader terms: the need to recognise individual and collective identities, foster a positive self-image in children, create and maintain a socially just environment and challenge deficit and tokenistic models of awareness.

## Terminology

On the whole parents and pupils appeared comfortable with the term 'race equality' even though their interpretations varied. In contrast, many teachers acknowledged unease with the vocabulary of race. There was a marked avoidance of words such as 'anti-racism' or 'race equality'; instead, teachers chose terms such as 'inclusion' and 'diversity'.

*I get uncomfortable with the word anti-racist... when you start using emotive words like 'racist' or 'anti-racist', it evokes all kinds of different impressions on people. So we talk about the egalitarian side of things.*

Headteacher, Primary

## Addressing the needs of minority ethnic pupils

Pupils and parents alike called for teachers to be more practised about addressing difference. Parents spoke of their children's identities in the face of the overwhelming ethnocentricity of society and questioned the extent to which teachers considered the messages they were sending out, sometimes inadvertently.

Some pupils spoke of being reminded that they were essentially different, and that there was lack of acknowledgement of cultural, racial, faith and linguistic diversity within the curriculum. A consequence was they tended to adopt the social norms, speech and belief systems which most closely approximated those of their majority ethnic peers. At the core of their dilemma lies a tension between the ways in which 'ethnic difference' is constructed and reinforced by teachers and schools, alongside a social imperative on minority ethnic pupils to assimilate to mainstream Scottish society.

Teachers were not unanimous in their views on how to approach racial diversity. The following statement made by a secondary school teacher echoes the view of many:

*We deal with everyone in the same way. They come through the door and they're just part of this school. And it doesn't really matter what their background is.*

Teacher, Secondary

This interpretation of 'being fair' extended to other aspects of school life where the term 'same' appeared to be taken to mean 'equal', as stated below:

*I don't think we make any special effort to encourage minority ethnic parents onto the school board because we treat everybody the same.*

Deputy Headteacher, Primary

Other teachers disagreed, explaining that to fully meet the needs of minority ethnic pupils, it was important to be conscious of all aspects of the child.

*Of course you have to see the differences, how else are you going to cater for the different requirements.*

Teacher, Secondary

How can teachers and policy makers take the issue of multiple identities and discrimination into account as part of their equality, fairness and inclusion agenda?

## Racism

Racism, both direct and indirect, was seen as a feature of daily life by minority ethnic pupils. Many recognised the gulf between their first hand experience and the perceptions held by their teachers, whom they considered to be unaware, disbelieving or ignorant about the reality of their lives in school and outside. The tone of the example below suggests that, for some young people at any rate, racism is unexceptional and dealing with it requires strength of character.

*Because she's Chinese. She gets picked on quite a lot. They say quite a few things about her. It's bad, but not that bad, we deal with it ourselves and move on. Name calling. Or if you're passing through corridors, standing in your way pretending they haven't seen you coming.*

Pupil

Parents, too, talked about experiences of racism. In terms of racist incidents, parents distinguished between bullying and racial harassment. There was praise for those schools that had worked to fight racism comprehensively, however, like their children, some parents had sadly come to expect racist abuse as a regular occurrence.

*When he just started there he was sort of bullied by others where he would have people sticking cigarettes in his bag, and burning his bag and things like that, but those were simple things where you think this is what happens. One could say, "oh that's serious", but you know, those are things – it's like everyday life for us.*

Parent

Teachers shared a different view to pupils and parents by stressing the success of school ethos and intolerance towards racial bullying and racist incidents. Most teachers thought of racism in terms of inter-pupil relations; however, some acknowledged the racist language of the staff room. In the main, the infrequency of racist incidents was interpreted as a sign that there were no problems.

## Race Equality in all-white schools

The absence of minority ethnic pupils, or their limited numbers, frequently used as a reason for failing to embed an anti-racist ethos in predominantly white schools, was noted by both pupils and parents. However, they applauded those schools that did not merely react to racist incidents but were pro-active in striving for race equality.

*I asked the headteacher... do you have any black children in this school? She said no... [but] these kids are going to grow up in a world that is diverse. So although we don't have any black children in the school we have to have the understanding that it is not an all white world. So that's an example of a forward thinking headteacher.*

Parent

How can an ethnically predominantly homogenous teaching profession be assisted to become more confident about taking issues of race, racism, faith and language forward?

Teachers in ethnically diverse schools recognised the difficulties encountered by their counterparts in predominantly white schools who, lacking the stimulation of a multi-ethnic environment, had to make a conscious and deliberate effort to put race equality on the agenda.

## Indicators of and Barriers to Inclusion

### Relationships and social networks

This area was given more emphasis by pupils and parents than by teachers.

Young people were eager to succeed educationally and socially. They spoke of their relationships in and out of school, and were aware of social dynamics between members of the school community and across ethnic groups. They valued the support of their peers and acknowledged the strength and confidence they derived from their friendships.

The desire for their children to grow academically and socially was also a priority for parents who recognised the value and impact of good, supportive exchange between teachers and pupils, the significance of children's friendships and the potential for damage from disinterested or antagonistic teachers and peers.

*[The] attitude of one teacher can put the child off education for life. And one good teacher's good attitude can build that child's future for life.*

Parent

Whilst some teachers touched on the topic of social skills, in the main the question of participation was interpreted only in terms of the pupils' culturally enriching contribution to the school and the way the school acknowledged their minority ethnic identity.

### Home-school relations

The nature of interaction between parents and teachers was given attention by parents, but was only minimally addressed by pupils and teachers.

Where parents felt respected and were consulted by teachers, they tended to express overall satisfaction with their children's education. Conversely, parents who were not offered the contact or information they desired appeared to feel unsupported and disillusioned.

*No, no help offered at all... I wanted to hear how she settled, whether she made friends... and I'm waiting for the teacher to say something. I know it's hard for the teacher to solve these things but at least if she said to me "there is a problem here"... I'm trying to do my best.*

Parent

### Multicultural and anti-racist education

A considerable number of pupils criticised the priority given to European languages over their home language/s. Similarly, there was concern that faiths other than Christianity were given only limited or biased coverage.

Parents called upon teachers to take a critical look at the nature of their resources and at curriculum content, as well as consider how they conveyed these and what impact they might have, both on majority ethnic and minority ethnic pupils.

How do teachers ensure they initiate and maintain an engagement with all parents that is meaningful, equitable and appropriate?

How can the education system take into account the faith and linguistic diversity of its pupils beyond the teaching of world faiths as part of RME and the occasional celebration in the classroom?

*For me it's not [about] having a race awareness week but having issues round diversity throughout the curriculum... it's not [about] wanting you to have [extra] time... it's more: how are you teaching your history... your modern languages... your science?... What I have a problem with is the fact that we've got to be special, we want to be different... No, we don't. We want to be the mainstream, in there.*

Parent

Teachers unanimously expressed a desire to convey a message of tolerance and inclusion to their pupils and many gave examples of the celebration of different festivals. A few described including discussions of racism for example, through the history curriculum.

### English as an Additional Language (EAL) Provision

Though EAL provision was not discussed by parents or pupils a significant number of teachers interviewed were very appreciative of the high quality work delivered by their EAL or Bilingual Support Services. They recognised the central role of these services for their schools. Teachers were, however, concerned about the lack of support for children whose first language is not English. The lack of opportunity for first language assessment was seen by a number of teachers as being discriminatory and required to be addressed. There was concern that bilingual learners were still seen as 'problems' within the system rather than assets to the teaching environment.

### Attainment

In the absence of effective ethnic monitoring and data analysis, data on attainment in relation to ethnicity is patchy and, therefore, inconclusive. However, levels of attainment, or perspectives about them in racial terms, will illuminate the extent to which equality and fairness are, or are not, in operation.

### Leadership

A positive school ethos, communicated from the top, was thought necessary by parents and teachers for the whole school to take race equality forward. Examples of strong, affirmative headteachers were given, illustrating the difference committed leadership could make to a school.

*Whatever they do [outside the school gates] will reflect on the school and [the headteacher] will not have [unacceptable language or behaviour]*

Parent

Without exception, all senior managers interviewed understood the importance of leading from the front on issues of equality and fairness and took this responsibility seriously. Some described the difficulties of winning the 'hearts and minds' of all staff in taking engagement with equality issues forward, while some teachers referred to headteachers who were less than enthusiastic about incorporating equality and fairness in the workplace.

### Recruitment and staff development

Increasing the number of minority ethnic teachers was seen by parents, pupils and teachers to have the potential to send out positive messages and provide role models for minority ethnic pupils.

Pupils also discussed the treatment of minority ethnic teachers, making it clear that they were aware and critical of the attitudes and behaviour of staff and pupils. The incident

described below led a number of the focus group participants to question whether they would be prepared to become teachers if it meant paying such a price.

*Once, in French, she (the minority ethnic teacher) was trying to go past, all the boys were annoying her and pulling her scarf because she wears a scarf as well. And they didn't let her past and she talked to the teacher about it and Miss X goes "It's nothing to do with me, go to someone else", and she just ignored her.*

Pupil

Parents further raised the need for all schools, regardless of their ethnic composition, to provide anti-racist staff development opportunities.

Acknowledging their uncertainty in addressing race equality, teachers, too, called for staff development opportunities that would allow for constructive and supportive discussion of how to work with diverse pupil groups. One head teacher's comment captured the reality for the majority of teachers interviewed:

*I think there is a problem in society as a whole, but it doesn't touch my life personally. I would welcome staff development or some form of training because I feel a bit at sea... because it's not something I've really thought much about before.*

Headteacher, Primary

## Conclusion

Through the Race Relations (Amendment) Act, inspectorial frameworks and the National Priorities (in particular Priority 3: Equality and Fairness and Priority 4: Values and Citizenship), the macro structures are in place for taking forward race equality in Scottish schools. Where schools have infused their ethos with race equality perspectives and proactively included them as part of the curriculum, young people, parents and teachers appear more confident and able to address race-related issues. Minority ethnic pupils' experiences vary depending on the schools they attend and are influenced by factors such as whether their teachers adopt multicultural or anti-racist approaches, give limited attention to issues of race equality or approach them as problematic or irrelevant. Parental perceptions, too, are shaped by the outlook and attitude of the school. Committed leadership and appropriate staff development were both identified as essential to achieving an inclusive and enabling school ethos.

*As a head, you have an acquired power by your position and the staff do an awful lot of listening to what you say. The head in the main has a key role in shaping the attitude and ethos of the school.*

Headteacher, Secondary

There is, therefore, as a response to pupils, parents and teachers, a need to encourage and facilitate the mainstreaming of race equality as required by the Race Relations (Amendment) Act, so that all school sectors are brought up to speed on this issue. Teachers and parents in particular stressed that it was time race equality was recognised as relevant to people of all ethnicities rather than being exclusive to multi-ethnic schools. Teachers who were more experienced in race equality matters cautioned against the dilution of anti-racist discourse within the terminologies of 'generic inclusion and diversity'.

Minority ethnic pupils and parents wanted race equality policies to be developed in consultation with pupils, parents, teachers and local organisations to ensure a comprehensive input. Minority ethnic pupils' views of their identities and requirements have to be taken into account if they are to be assisted to grow personally, academically and socially, and if they are to be enabled to speak out and contribute to the school community.

Parents called for schools to acknowledge the validity and significance of their parental role and ensure that all parents are supported and encouraged to participate in their children's lives at school. Overall, minority ethnic parents saw schools as failing to consider what avenues of involvement are genuinely open to those parents whose voices are not generally heard; in particular, the involvement of minority ethnic parents appeared to be limited to a (multi-) cultural input when there is real potential for engagement and co-operation at other levels.

While the experience of racism on a regular basis was acknowledged by many minority ethnic pupils and parents, teachers tended to pride themselves on the school's success in dealing with racism. Consideration, therefore, needs to be given not just to putting in place effective reporting and recording mechanisms but also to the establishment of procedures which monitor how conflicts are resolved, particularly from the perspective of those individuals or groups which have been targeted.

The value of EAL services and of individual EAL members of staff was appreciated in some schools where teachers acknowledged the contribution and support provided by their EAL colleagues, and that co-operation was in turn praised by EAL teachers. On the other hand, where all EAL and race issues are seen as problematic and passed on to EAL staff, the situation is clearly unsatisfactory for staff and pupils alike. In the words of one EAL teacher "my work is not respected, we are seen as people who work with the bottom group". There is a need for schools to consider how peripatetic EAL staff are supported and valued by management and colleagues, particularly in terms of their role in furthering the attainment and achievement of EAL pupils.

Inclusive schools are assisted by a reassessment of the composition, perspective and abilities of their teachers. Appropriate staff development was recognised by many as a prerequisite for accelerating the process of embedding race equality in the work of schools. The provision of assistance to ensure teaching resources are developed and are used appropriately and imaginatively to foster awareness and appreciation of diversity was seen to have a beneficial impact across the whole curriculum. In addition, it was felt by some that the training, recruitment and career progression requirements of minority ethnic people needed to be supported in order to increase the number of minority ethnic teachers and so produce a more diverse teaching force at all levels across Scotland: "What's missing here is the role model, what's missing here is seeing a black teacher" (Parent).

The differences and commonalities between the three stakeholder groups illustrated in this study must lie at the core of any development. What has become clear is that perceptions of what constitutes inclusion, what assists and what hinders it, vary in the way they are presented or weighted. Any drive to promote inclusion has to take on board and reach across that divide or it will fail to engage the commitment of pupils, parents and teachers.

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